

Department of Human Services

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Articles in Today's Clips Monday, December 3, 2007

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A 14-PART SERIES

Introduction: Ricky Holland's story

Take a new look at a foster child's disturbing life and horrific death. If you had been there ...

December 2, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

On a raw January day in 2006, Tim Holland fell to his knees after leading police to the skeletal remains of his son Ricky in a Michigan swamp.

"What have I done?" he wailed as he looked at the black plastic garbage bag partially submerged in the icy water. "What have I done?"

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What could anyone have done to save Ricky?

What *did* anyone do?

Ricky's story got national attention when the search for the missing 7-year-old turned into an ugly case of murder at the hands of his adoptive parents, Tim and Lisa Holland.

They convinced authorities they were a deserving couple seeking to build a family through the foster care system.

But a Free Press investigation shines new light on how their dark, secretive world unraveled, and Ricky with it. Confidential documents provide disturbing new details about his life, death -- and those who were supposed to protect him.

Ricky came into foster care as a bright child hurt by neglect. His problems only grew, masked by powerful drugs and the Hollands' manipulation of teachers, social workers, doctors, child welfare investigators and others who looked for abuse but didn't always see it or act.

Would you have seen it?

Could you have saved Ricky?

Read his story and decide.

It won't be as easy as you think.

[Chapter 1: Entering foster care >>](#)

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Chapter 1: Ricky enters foster care

Out of options to care for Ricky, drifting mom bids a tearful good-bye

December 2, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

First of 14 parts

Casey Gann was 19 and homeless when she brought her 3-year-old son to the Jackson County Department of Human Services to place him in foster care seven years ago. Tears in her eyes, she asked for a few minutes alone with Ricky.

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"I talked to him and told him that he wasn't going to be with Mommy," she said. "I just told him that he was going to be going with somebody else, living with somebody else, until Mom could get it straightened out to where I would be able to take care of him.

"After I got done saying that, I said, 'Is that OK?' "

Ricky nodded.

"Before he left, he gave me a big hug and a big kiss and said, 'I love you, Mommy.' "

Then Ricky was led away.

The boy had been through a lot already. He'd traveled between California and Michigan three times on a bus with his mom. He'd bounced around homeless shelters and the homes of friends and relatives. He may have been sexually abused.

He'd had a rough way to go from the start.

His mother was just 16, a small-town girl from Springport in Jackson County, when she gave birth to Ricky on Sept. 8, 1997, in Chula Vista, Calif., a town on San Diego Bay near the Mexican border. Casey Gleason had hooked up with the much-older Rick Gann and followed him to the West Coast from Michigan. Rick was 39 when his son was born.

They weren't yet married when they brought Ricky home to a chaotic household where drugs were used. A half-dozen or more people lived there, on and off, including Casey's father. Casey said she tried to shield Ricky from the partying that went on in a backyard guesthouse dubbed "the Office."

To Rick, a 300-pound Army veteran on disability for deteriorating vertebrae, Casey was the neglectful parent. He said she would put Ricky in a walker or high chair and pay no attention to him. But if Rick was serious about being a dad, he blew it when he was busted in April 1999 while crossing into California from Mexico with several pounds of marijuana.

"It was like his third or fourth time," Casey said. "I told him not to 'cause he was going to get in trouble. And then my dad woke me up the next morning and said, 'Casey, I don't want you to cry or get upset, but Rick's in jail.' "

<http://www.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title=Chapter+1%3A+Ricky+enters+foster+care...> 12/3/2007

By then, she didn't really love Rick anymore. She caught a bus for Michigan with Ricky.

The two of them drifted around central Michigan, going back to California once more to visit Rick. But when he landed back in jail for violating parole, Casey and Ricky caught another bus to Michigan in early 2000.

Things didn't go so well. Casey couldn't find work. Once she did, it didn't last long. She went from boyfriend to boyfriend. Ricky was along for the bumpy ride.

Two complaints alleging that he was being abused were lodged with Child Protective Services in Jackson County that summer. One, in June, said Ricky was dirty and had a bruise on his body that looked like someone had hit him with an open hand. Another, in July, said he'd been whipped with a belt. Little is known about the allegations and nothing was ever proved.

By September, Casey was out of options to provide for Ricky. On the afternoon of the 23rd, she turned Ricky over to the State of Michigan.

Tim and Lisa Holland marry ...

It would be six years before Lisa Holland would be found guilty of first-degree murder and child abuse in Ricky's death and Tim Holland would plead guilty to second-degree murder.

The two met in the spring of 1997 through an online dating service. The relationship deepened quickly. A few weeks after they began dating, Tim asked Lisa's father for permission to marry her.

After their Nov. 29, 1997, church wedding in Williamston, Tim and Lisa honeymooned in Las Vegas and moved into a small apartment in Haslett, near Lansing. Tim worked first as a security guard at a Meijer in Lansing, then as a private investigator, even buying a Glock semiautomatic handgun.

Lisa's jealousy emerged early. She flew into a rage when Tim went for a walk and ended up talking with a woman who managed the apartment complex. Lisa accused him of having an affair and pointed the Glock at him, Tim said. But he never filed a police report and later sold the gun.

Years later, he told police he never knew what was going to set his wife off. "If I'm not home at a certain time, she's yelling and screaming at me," he said.

Tim began working as a warrant enforcement officer with the Jackson County Friend of the Court on March 16, 1998, the same day as his supervisor, Ward Staffeld. Staffeld said Tim left early that day -- and many others -- after getting a call from Lisa. She controlled him, Staffeld would later tell authorities, and he advised Tim to "get away ... while he still had a chance."

But Tim stayed with Lisa and, to satisfy a job requirement that he live in Jackson County, they took out a \$70,000 mortgage on a three-bedroom home on a large lot in Summit Township, just south of the Jackson city limits.

... and begin to plan a family

By mid-2000, Lisa and Tim Holland, then 27 and 31, had weathered a bad patch in their marriage, and baby fever struck. Lisa became increasingly wrapped up in the desire to have a child, even consulting with a doctor about fertility treatments.

Earlier in the year, Tim had talked about divorce. He complained at work that his wife was lazy and, though she didn't have a job, wasn't doing anything around the house and had maxed out their credit cards.

"He was up at 4:30 doing laundry because she didn't know how to do laundry," coworker Robin Walling said. "She didn't know how to cook, didn't know how to clean. He said, 'She doesn't know how to do anything!'" "

But when he'd bring up divorce, she'd bring up her ailments, including headaches she thought might be a sign of a brain tumor. And if he gave her an ultimatum, she "threw herself on the ground and started kicking, just like a child," Walling said Tim told her.

After they gave up on fertility treatments because of the cost, Lisa hit on the idea of foster parenting. It was a pathway to adoption: The state pays you to care for children while judges and social workers sort out the best course.

Wanting a family, too, Tim backed off from divorce. They applied to become foster parents through the Jackson County Department of Human Services and took the training. Background checks described them as upstanding citizens.

Staffeld wrote a letter of recommendation, calling Tim "an outstanding human being" and Lisa -- someone he didn't know well -- "a lovely person."

"Any children assigned to his care would be fortunate to be living under his roof," Staffeld wrote.

The Hollands' provisional foster care license came through Sept. 21, 2000. The state said they could have up to four foster children 5 and younger, though none who was highly aggressive or destructive or had severe emotional or physical impairments.

Tim and Lisa Holland were ready for a child.

COMING TOMORROW: A hint of the trouble to come.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 2: Hints of trouble >>](#)

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BECOMING A FOSTER PARENT

Ricky's death boosts standards

December 2, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The Ricky Holland case led to increased scrutiny of existing and prospective foster parents, as well as better training for those seeking to be licensed.

After the case became widely publicized, foster care agencies around the state examined their screening and training procedures to see whether they could be improved.

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Orchards Children's Services, a private nonprofit agency based in Southfield, began giving prospective foster parents a test designed to assess their child-rearing aptitude. The agency gives the test before and after training, to see whether changes are evident.

"I think the quality of foster parents has risen" because of the stepped-up training and testing, said Michael E. Williams, president and chief executive officer of Orchards.

Finding caring adults to provide safe, nurturing foster homes is "getting tougher every year," said Bob Ennis, president of Ennis Center for Children, a private nonprofit agency that works in Wayne, Oakland and Genesee counties.

Michigan has about 7,500 licensed foster homes, down from a high of more than 8,000 in 2001, according to the state Department of Human Services. About half are licensed through private agencies such as Ennis and Orchards.

As of October, 18,892 Michigan children were in foster care, 9,049 of them in licensed foster homes, group homes or other facilities. Another 6,856 were living with relatives, and the remainder were in their own homes, considered AWOL or in other situations.

The Michigan Department of Human Services and private agencies say they need foster parents who are willing to work with children's birth parents; support efforts to return children to their homes; can work with kids who have significant emotional and behavioral issues, and can help teenage foster children move toward independence.

Prospective foster parents are not required to own homes, be married or give up jobs. They are required to complete licensing applications, undergo criminal background checks and have no history of substantiated abuse or neglect of children.

They also must provide medical statements for all household members, have environmental and licensing inspections of their homes, provide three acceptable references and attend training.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

Chapter 2: Hints of trouble

As Ricky's behavior worsens, his foster mother is on edge

December 3, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Second of 14 parts

Ricky Holland lasted only nine days in his first foster home. His foster mother found him trying to fondle a younger boy, and because she operated a day care center in the home, Ricky had to go.

Advertisement

The 3-year-old landed with Tim and Lisa Holland on Oct. 2, 2000. He was their first foster child and they thought he was a gem. But a few weeks later, Tim walked in on something disturbing.

Another foster child who had been placed with them, a 6-year-old boy, was on top of a naked Ricky. Ricky wasn't protesting. It was another instance of sexually tinged behavior, often a sign of an abused child. Lisa called Child Protective Services.

The Hollands weren't found to be at fault. They met with caseworkers to discuss safety measures and installed a monitor and alarms on the boys' bedroom doors. The 6-year-old soon was moved to a different foster home.

One form of discipline: No dinner

Three more foster children -- siblings 7, 4 and 2 -- arrived at the Hollands' in early January. Teresa and Darren Bloodworth had lost custody of the kids temporarily because their house was dirty and needed repairs to remove lead paint.

Lisa Holland, who by then had a part-time job at a Rite Aid, quit to be a stay-at-home mom.

The oldest sibling, Teresa May Bloodworth, now 13, said she often arrived home from school and found Lisa watching television while Ricky and her 4-year-old brother, Dallas, were locked in their room, presumably for misbehaving.

Teresa May said Lisa used other forms of discipline, including a version of time-out in which she'd have the kids hold pennies against the wall with their noses. A penny had to stay in place for a minute for each year of the child's age. If it fell, the clock started over.

Two or three times, Lisa sent Ricky and Dallas to bed without dinner, Teresa May said. She said she fixed macaroni and cheese with chopped-up hot dogs for the boys after Lisa fell asleep, carefully relocking their bedroom door afterward and cleaning up the dishes.

Tim later said he took over child-care duties when he came home from work. Teresa May remembers that Tim was always nice to her and took her out to dinner with the other kids for her birthday.

Lisa Holland's complaints grow

It wasn't long after Ricky arrived in the Hollands' home that Lisa's complaints about him to his foster care worker began to grow: He was hyper, aggressive with other children, sneaky, constantly getting into things and putting himself and others in danger with his actions.

She insisted she needed a higher difficulty-of-care subsidy for him. So the caseworker at the Jackson County Department of Human Services, Theresa Bronsberg, arranged for an evaluation by child psychologist Jerel Del Dotto of Birmingham, who worked two days a week at Foote Hospital in Jackson.

After tests, Del Dotto decided that Ricky's problems fell into a catchall category -- disruptive behavior disorder -- but said he didn't think further medical or psychological intervention was needed. He thought the boy could be managed with proper parenting. Lisa didn't agree with his diagnosis. She also complained to Bronsberg that Ricky was wandering the house at night and urinating in spots, and being disruptive at the Head Start program he attended.

At the school, Ricky was viewed as a normal 3-year-old who had flashes of defiance. Tests showed his basic skills and emotional development were typical for his age.

And Bronsberg noted only one weakness in Lisa's parenting skills: She was allowing Ricky to have too much control. Overall, Bronsberg told her superiors, Ricky and the Hollands were coming together as a family.

Therapist says Ricky needs TLC

After observing him for 10 months, Susan Honeck, Ricky's therapist at Catholic Charities of Jackson, concluded that Ricky was suffering from reactive attachment disorder caused by the separation from his birth mother.

Once, while playing with two plastic horses during a counseling session, Ricky said, "The little horse is going to die if it can't be with its mother."

Honeck thought he needed a soft touch and urged Lisa to "touch Ricky on the shoulder or to gently touch his cheeks to get his attention to focus on her when speaking to him." But once, Honeck observed Lisa pinching Ricky's cheeks with one hand hard enough to pucker his lips, to force him to look at her.

"It was not a loving touch," said Honeck, who thought Lisa always seemed overwhelmed by Ricky.

Honeck also told Bronsberg that Ricky needed special attention, "in a household where he had one-on-one contact and was the only child." But her advice made little impression at the Jackson County DHS. The Bloodworth children left in April 2001, but that July, a new foster child -- a 4-month-old boy -- arrived at the Hollands'.

The next month during a visit at the DHS office, Ricky's mother, Casey Gann, found a bruise on his buttock. Ricky told a protective services investigator that he'd fallen on a toy. Lisa Holland said she didn't know how he came to be bruised, but that he did play aggressively with toys. Child Protective Services decided there wasn't enough evidence to open a formal investigation.

Ricky starts getting medication

By September 2001, Lisa was asking for a new psychological assessment of Ricky. Bronsberg arranged for an appointment with Dr. Aurif Abedi, a child psychiatrist at Foote Hospital.

After the first session, based on his observations and others' previous assessments, Abedi diagnosed the boy with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder -- the diagnosis Lisa had sought for months -- and reactive attachment disorder, the bonding problem that Honeck detected.

Abedi put Ricky, who had just turned 4, on Ritalin, a stimulant often prescribed for hyperactive school-age children to help them focus better. When preschool children are prescribed Ritalin, experts say, it's generally because the children are disturbed and other therapies haven't helped.

Abedi advised the Hollands to keep an eye on Ricky's moods and continue his weekly counseling with Honeck.

Through the fall, Ricky's behavior worsened.

"Ricky's developmental accomplishments regressed to their previous levels of defecating in his pants and on his bed," Abedi wrote at one point, reflecting what Lisa reported to him and the DHS, and documentation she provided from the Head Start school.

"His behavior at school was again aggressive and violent with the other children. ... The skills Ricky was developing are being undone, and his emotional state is currently very fragile."

In a recent interview, Abedi recalled that during one visit, he suggested Ricky might need hospitalization. Tim Holland asked him whether there was another option. Abedi prescribed a mood stabilizer for Ricky.

"We made that change and it worked for him," Abedi said. The doctor, who said he sees 60 to 80 children a week, said he spent perhaps 20 minutes with Ricky during visits and had to rely on what his caregivers told him.

The Holland family "came to me and looked like a perfectly normal, average middle-class family," Abedi said. "Looking back on that case, it all comes down to: Were they really telling me what was going on?"

"God knows what was going on in that house."

TUESDAY: A dog leash and a pair of handcuffs.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

[Chapter 1: Entering foster care](#)

Chapter 3: Games or abuse? >>

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ADOPTING FOSTER CHILDREN

State to get kids' input

December 3, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Before Tim and Lisa Holland adopted Ricky in October 2003, social workers were not required to talk with other foster children who had lived in the home to gain insights.

This fall, however, Verlie Ruffin, the children's ombudsman in Michigan, said social workers should interview those children when evaluating the fitness of foster parents to adopt a child in their care.

No employee of the state Department of Human Services ever interviewed three foster siblings who lived with the Hollands for several months in 2001. The oldest, Teresa May Bloodworth, now 13, said she saw Lisa Holland mistreat Ricky.

"Interviewing adult children and minor children who no longer reside in the home would provide relevant information concerning the prospective adoptive family's ability to nurture and safely care for children," Ruffin said in her annual report, released in November.

In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, the DHS estimates that 2,481 foster children were adopted, down from 2,589 in 2006.

Beginning in February, state adoption workers will be required to interview foster children formerly in the home "who are of appropriate age and ability," the DHS decided.

That includes adult children, the DHS said.

DEARBORN

Change in foster program coming

Kids won't sleep in office anymore

December 1, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The director of the state Department of Human Services told child welfare leaders meeting in Dearborn on Friday that the agency will stop the practice of having foster children sleep overnight in an office building in Detroit.

A shortage of foster homes willing to take in troubled teenagers in Wayne County and a lack of temporary shelters for abused or neglected children led to at least 62 children spending eight to 24 hours, usually overnight, in a DHS office in Detroit's Eastern Market since April.

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DHS Director Ismael Ahmed told about 300 people attending the Save Our Children Summit at the University of Michigan-Dearborn that he has assigned a top deputy to find alternative settings, including establishing a new 15-bed temporary shelter for foster kids.

"We are committed to holding public agencies to the same standards and expectations that we have for other child-placing agencies, both public and private," Ahmed said.

Using a term from 20 years ago for foster children who spent hours in DHS offices, "lobby bodies," Ahmed said that his department's own licensing report highlighted the problem at the Wayne County DHS central operations office.

Ahmed, who became DHS director in September, said foster care caseloads at the DHS are way too high -- about 30 per worker.

A small funding increase in the 2008 fiscal budget will help the agency bring caseloads to a more reasonable 20-to-1 level, Ahmed said.

The summit was organized by Child's Hope and the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Out-Wayne County to address the state's foster care crisis, particularly in Wayne County, where three children have been killed in foster homes since August 2006.

Michigan Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan asked for help in getting a package of bills already passed by the state Senate to be considered by the House.

The bills would establish a child death review team -- independent of government and private interests -- to review cases of children in Michigan's child welfare system who were killed.

The proposed legislation also would require the DHS to report deaths of foster children to the Office of the Children's Ombudsman.

"We shouldn't have to find out about these children by reading it in the newspaper," Corrigan said, referring to slain children Ricky Holland, Isaac Lethbridge, Allison Newman and James Bradley Jr.

The group heard from a former foster child, 22-year-old Jessica Lindsey of Detroit, who entered foster care at 14, changed foster homes several times and also changed high schools.

Still, Lindsey said she has a good job and a positive attitude.

"My experience was not the best in the foster care system, but my experience made me the person I am today," she said.

Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.

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Saturday, December 1, 2007

New kids shelter on way

State's plans for facility in Wayne County follow report on lack of interim protective care housing.

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

The Michigan Department of Human Services on Friday announced plans to open a 15-bed shelter to temporarily house children who are removed from their homes.

The proposal comes on the heels of a report that found scores of abused or neglected children have spent extended periods, including overnight, in the Department of Human Services' Central Office in Detroit due to a lack of shelter, according to a Nov. 1 report by the state Bureau of Children and Adult Licensing.

The new shelter, which could be operating in Wayne County by early next year, is not intended to be a permanent placement site, but meant for children taken into state protective care to avoid spending the night in administrative offices without adequate food or sleeping accommodations, said Ismael Ahmed, department director.

"Sometimes we get a child at 4 o'clock or 5 in the evening, and trying to get a placement that night is really very difficult, but we also don't want our kids sitting in the offices until the next morning," Ahmed said. "We want to assure there is someplace where there is a bed, a dinner, and someone to watch over them. A lot of these children are traumatized already. We want to make sure the experience for them is the best it possibly can be under the conditions."

The situation illustrates a "desperate need" for families to get involved and become foster parents, said Sophie Womack, vice president for medical affairs for Harper and Hutzler hospitals in Detroit.

"We don't have enough placements for children," Womack said. "Someone has got to take some responsibility for taking care of these kids."

Ahmed and Womack spoke at the Save Our Children Summit, a day-long event aimed at addressing Michigan's Foster Care System. The event was sponsored by Child's Hope, the child abuse prevention council in Wayne County.

The state foster care system currently has its largest number of children available for adoption and not enough people willing to provide foster and adoptive homes. "I feel sorry for these children when they are removed from their home and have to sleep on a couch," said Carol Matthews, who, along with her husband, has fostered 26 children and adopted two.

"If everyone would take responsibility for just one of these foster children, we wouldn't be in the crisis we're in."

Anyone interested in becoming a foster or adoptive parent may call (313) 396-5437 in Wayne County. Residents in other counties may call the local Department of Human Services office or visit

www.michigan.gov/dhs.

You can reach Kim Kozlowski at (313) 222-2024 or kkozlowski@detnews.com.

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Privatizing foster care, adoption can be effective

Saturday, December 01, 2007

By Sen. Bill Hardiman

Special To The Press

Since I took office in 2003, the Michigan Legislature has been wrestling with lingering budget challenges.

This year's budget battle was the most intense and controversial that I have seen in my five years as a State Senator. A wise man once said "For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven...a time to break down, and a time to build up."

In these tough times of economic and budgetary crisis, we must take the difficult, yet necessary steps to make state government more efficient and effective. This is a time to change, to reform, to rebuild our state government. We can no longer afford to simply make small cuts, slowly whittling away state services. While additional cuts can be made, in some areas we have stretched our public system too thin and too far, for too long.

Throughout the long 10-month budget battle, I, along with my colleagues have stressed the need to reform and reconstruct state government. As chair of three critical appropriations subcommittees, Human Services, Community Colleges and Transportation, I took an active role in calling on the state to make necessary reforms.

Of all these budgets, the Department of Human Services budget proved to be the most contentious. Now, after months of hard fought negotiations and debate, we have passed a budget, Senate Bill 232, that will enhance the reform process in critical areas within the Department of Human Services.

Senate Bill 232 directs the DHS to utilize to a greater extent our community-based partners in foster care, adoption services and juvenile programs. There is a new emphasis on results and performance-based budgeting by shifting resources to maximize services.

The budget relies upon more private juvenile services, and savings will be used to hire more front-line county DHS workers. Unless we provide more help, these workers will continue to have overwhelming caseloads, making it very difficult to do meaningful social work with families and move people off welfare and into the workforce.

The budget calls on the department to transfer 80 juvenile justice cases from the very costly \$554 a day W.J. Maxey Boys Training School in Whitmore Lake to private community-based agencies at a cost of \$225 to \$250 a day. This will allow the more than \$8 million dollars of annual savings to be used in other parts of the budget.

Additionally, the budget shifts some adoption services to community-based providers, while freeing up staff to qualify Michigan children for more federal funding. These changes make government work more efficiently. Senate Bill 232 increases cooperation between state and private community based agencies, and reduces paperwork or regulatory hurdles, such as complicated rate structures. The bill increases the level of service, while reducing state costs and shifts dollars to other areas of the budget that need it more.

I appreciate the support of my fellow legislators and colleagues in the community. I realize that these changes were difficult for many, including the governor and the Department of Human Services, and I am grateful for their cooperation.

I believe the Department of Human Services is critical to our state as it serves so many vulnerable children and families, and these changes are necessary to improve services and efficiency for both the recipients

and taxpayers of Michigan.

Although Michigan is currently in a very challenging economic and social environment, my vision for Michigan's future remains optimistic.

I see a Michigan where government is smaller, but more efficient and effective.

I see a Michigan where businesses flourish, producing quality products and providing the opportunity for good paying jobs.

I see a Michigan where community organizations, houses of worship and individuals care for their vulnerable children and families.

I see a Michigan committed to enhancing the quality of life for its residents.

Senate Bill 232 is a step toward this vision. It is my goal to continue to push for governmental reform in Lansing and work toward a brighter future for Michigan.

-- Sen. Bill Hardiman, R-Kentwood, represents the 29th District.

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Muskegon Chronicle

In and out of foster homes, one boy gets ultimate wish

Sunday, December 02, 2007

By Susan Harrison Wolffis

susanharrison@muskegonchronicle.com

Demari Mathews was 11, a child without a home to call his own, when he was ordered into foster care by a Muskegon County probate court judge in 2003.

For the next three years, he lived in a series of foster homes, challenging even the most seasoned foster parents with his behavior and attitude.

"Let's just say, Demari wasn't an easy boy to parent. We knew he was going to need a special fit," said Rosemary Stellino, child welfare supervisor for Muskegon County's Department of Human Services.

By 2006, Demari had exhausted the foster care system and was placed in Child Haven, an emergency shelter in Muskegon for children who are removed from their homes by DHS Protective Services workers -- and from situations like Demari's when children are between foster care placements.

Although there are 96 licensed foster homes for children in Muskegon County, there is "always a need" for families who will take on "multiple siblings and teenagers, especially belligerent teenagers," she said.

"A lot of people are wary of teenagers," Stellino said.

Undaunted, Demari took matters into his own hands.

Last year, he asked his basketball coach, Vanderbilt "Van" Mathews IV, if he could come live with him.

"He said he was tired of going from foster home to foster home. He asked if my wife and I would be his foster parents," the 47-year-old Mathews said. "I told him I had to talk with the wife ... the key was to convince her it was a good idea."

After careful consideration, the answer was yes.

"We talked to the whole family ... sat everybody down and talked about it because we knew this was going to change all of our lives," said Karen Mathews.

And how.

On Nov. 20, after a year as his foster parents, Van and Karen Mathews officially adopted Demari.

"I love that boy," said Karen Mathews, 45, wiping away a new mother's tears during the adoption proceedings in Muskegon County Family Court Judge Gregory Pittman's courtroom. "He's such a blessing."

Before Demari could come live with them as a foster child, Van and Karen Mathews had to be licensed by the state of Michigan as foster parents. Their home in East Muskegon had to meet certain state requirements. They had to go through special training. And their sons -- Van Mathews V, 21, who attends Muskegon Community College; and Gavin Mathews, 14, a freshman at Muskegon High School -- had to agree there was room for one more in their home.

"Often the most successful matches are with a child's favorite teacher or someone from church or, in this case, a coach," Stellino said. "But what makes Demari's story so unusual is he found his own (foster care)

placement."

Add in one more unusual factor. Because Demari is 14, by state law, he had to give the judge his permission to be adopted.

"I'm happy to be placed in their home," Demari told Pittman in court.

"You're in a wonderful place. You couldn't be in a better place," the judge assured the boy. "What's so great is you want them as much as they want you."

The boy and his coach were hardly strangers.

Gavin and Demari had both played for Port City Football League when they were in grade school, and the family was well aware of his talents and his situation. In 2006, they met up again -- but on the basketball court. Van Mathews IV and his son, Van Mathews V, were Demari's coaches in the Next Generation Youth Basketball League, a recreational program in Muskegon County or aspiring basketball players.

"That's my star," said Van Mathews V, who coached Demari's team to a national championship in the American Youth Basketball Tournament last year in Fort Wayne, Ind.

Demari, who wants to be a running back in the National Football League, is an eighth-grader at Steele Middle School. He is on the school's football, basketball and track teams.

"The best part is I know I'm going to stay here," he said. "This is my home."

Van Mathews IV, who teaches math at Timberline Charter Academy in Muskegon, turned out to be more than just an on-court coach to Demari last year.

When he found out that Demari was living at Child Haven and didn't have transportation either to the practices or games, Mathews volunteered to get him there and back.

"The biggest problem I saw (at Child Haven) is that no one wanted to see him ... nobody came to visit him," Mathews said.

It was during one of their rides from practice that Demari asked Mathews if could come live with him.

While at Child Haven, Demari said he dreamed of being "settled down." He yearned for his own room and imagined a family who would come to his football and basketball games -- where he excelled -- and cheer him on to victory and success.

"He liked how we came to all of Gavin's games," Van Mathews said. "Now we do the same for him."

Linda Townsend, the adoption coordinator for Catholic Charities West Michigan -- Lakeshore who handled Demari's adoption, calls it "a match made in heaven."

"Everyone in that family lives and breathes sports," Townsend said. "Their whole life is sports."

On the Sunday afternoon before the adoption proceedings, the entire Mathews family was watching the Detroit Lions game on television before attending afternoon services at Zion Tabernacle Church in downtown Muskegon.

"I told them if I have to go to all those games of theirs, they can go to church," Karen Mathews said.

Going to church twice on Sunday is just one of the rules Demari has had to adopt as his own. Church, doing well in school, choosing friends wisely, following through on things, respecting his elders: Van Mathews said he expects these things from all three of his sons and even his 11-month-old grandson, Van Mathews VI, when it's time.

"I told you: If I fuss at (Van and Gavin) for doin' something, I'm going fuss at you for doin' the same thing," he said.

But that's only the half of it. That sense of being "settled in" that he used to only dream about comes along with the expectations.

"We're here for each other. He has our backs. We have his. That's what a family does," Karen Mathews said.

She has encouraged Demari to continue his relationship with his biological mother and his siblings. Details about Demari's removal from his birth home are protected information. Neither Townsend nor Stellino is allowed to reveal the circumstances, and Demari chose not to share them, either.

"You only have one mother. We don't want anything to get in the way of that," Karen Mathews told him during the Sunday afternoon interview before his adoption was final.

"Now I have two (mothers)," Demari said, looking away from the football game to join in the conversation. "You're my family."

His is a family purely of choice.

"We're all in a learning process," Karen Mathews said. "He's learning. We're learning. We're all learning to be a family."

Pittman, who grew up with Van Mathews IV on Riordan Street in Muskegon Heights, took time out from the adoption ceremony to talk about what their families were like when they kids. Van Mathews IV is one of seven; Karen Mathews, one of eight.

"This is a happy day," Van Mathews IV said after the adoption ceremony was done, papers had been signed and the formalities, taken care of.

True to form, the family was off to basketball practice and bowling leagues that night.

Karen Mathews, who works at MICR Graphics Printing/ Billy the Printer in Grand Haven, watched her husband and three sons work out who was going where and when they'd be home. She hugged them one after another, extending Demari's embrace a little longer than usual.

"He's our son," she said, still wiping away tears.

She and her husband will keep their foster care license current, even though she doesn't anticipate taking in anymore children.

"But never say never," she said, looking at her family that has grown in size this year. "It's all about love, you know. Love conquers everything."

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Muskegon Chronicle

Opening hearts, homes to hard-to-place kids

Sunday, December 02, 2007

By Susan Harrison Wolffis

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In Muskegon County, 366 children are in foster care, most of them removed from their biological homes because of abuse or neglect.

Of that number, 62 are eligible for adoption.

Since 2006, Stephanie and Tim Seidell of Twin Lake have opened their home to four of them -- Benjamin, 9; Jason, 8; Marcus, 5; and Gabriel, 21/2 -- first as foster parents, then as adoptive parents.

All four children were considered "hard to place," said Rosemary Stellino, child welfare supervisor for Muskegon County's Department of Human Services.

"Not to us," Tim Seidell said.

But there is a "huge need" for foster homes -- and adoptive parents -- for "multiple siblings, belligerent teenagers and children with disabilities," said Cheryl Nebedum, Muskegon County Department of Human Services' program manager.

The Seidells were undeterred by such challenges when the three boys, who are brothers, and Gabrielle -- who has several developmental and physical disabilities -- were placed in their licensed foster home.

"It's a challenge," Seidell said, "but if you can't handle the hard stuff, you shouldn't be doing it."

The Seidells, who are both 38, also have two biological daughters: Taylor, 12, and Madison, 10. A few years ago, Tim Seidell, who is a plumber, said he and his wife "started talking about how nice it would be to have more kids in the family."

The couple decided to apply for a foster-home license to care for children in need and contemplated adopting. A year ago, the Seidells adopted Gabrielle. Then Benjamin, Jason and Marcus came into their fold after being removed from their biological home by protective service workers.

"We got the deluxe package," Stephanie Seidell said.

They didn't have to go through the foster care or adoption process alone.

The Department of Human Services' adoption services program provides services to children whose parental rights have been terminated due to child abuse or neglect, as well as to families who want to adopt.

In their case, a DHS adoption worker was assigned to help them. But caseworkers from private agencies like Bethany Christian Services, Catholic Charities West Michigan Lakeshore (former Catholic Social Services) or Pathways of Michigan (former Child and Family Services/Children's Resource of Holland) are also assigned to cases.

Many children who are available for adoption qualify for financial assistance, medical subsidies and counseling. That assistance continues until the child turns 18 years old.

Although the amount varies from family to family, the total amount of support paid to adoptive families in Michigan is \$208 million annually. The subsidies range from \$14.24 per day for young children with no physical, emotional or mental problems, Stellino said, to as much as \$35.59 per day for medically fragile teenagers who need extraordinary care.

Often, the children receiving adoption assistance have "special circumstances," officials said, that make finding appropriate homes more challenging. They may be teenagers, members of a racial or ethnic minority, part of a sibling group or have physical, mental or emotional impairments.

Although the Department of Human Services is involved in the cases of children whose parental rights have been terminated because of abuse or neglect, it is everyone's responsibility, Nebedum said .

"This is not just a DHS problem," she said. "We can't do it alone. This has to be a community issue."

Sometimes it's strangers like the Seidells or Twin Lake's Bill and Joy Oleen, or Muskegon's Debra Oliver who reach out -- adopting three groups of siblings on Nov. 20, which is designated as Michigan Adoption Day.

Other times, relatives step forward.

Angela Acre of Muskegon has adopted four grandchildren, including 2-year-old Lukas, "to help keep these kids together. I'm just grateful I can."

Whatever their circumstance, Muskegon County Family Court Judge Gregory Pittman commended the nine area families who stepped forward on Adoption Day to adopt 16 children.

"Thank you for opening your hearts and your homes," he said. "Thank you for giving these children an opportunity."

Stephanie and Tim Seidell reached toward the three boys who now bear their last name, wrapping them in a big hug.

"We're the ones who've been blessed," she told the judge. "We get to watch them grow."

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KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

County's first girls-care facility is a chance to reach for the stars

Sunday, December 02, 2007

BY STEPHANIE ESTERS

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KALAMAZOO -- Several pairs of hands reach toward the dark blue sky, pinpoints of white indicating stars in the heavens. Bangles on the upstretched arms read ``hope," ``faith," ``love."

Kimberly Bracewell-Thorpe, a Kalamazoo social worker, said the painting means a lot to her because it represents her desire to encourage the girls with whom she works to reach for the stars.

The painting is one of the first things guests see when they enter a three-story Victorian house on Lovell Street, the site of the county's only child-caring facility for girls -- the Let's Talk About It Girl's Home. The state's Department of Human Services licensed Thorpe to open the facility on Oct. 10.

``Don't you just love the girls reaching for the sky?" Bracewell-Thorpe, 37, asked a group of guests touring the home. ``I want their eyes to be opened to the possibility of what life holds for them."

Up to 15 girls -- ages 13 to 17 -- can be housed in the home in Kalamazoo's Vine neighborhood. The day before Thanksgiving, the facility received its first client, a 17-year-old girl Kalamazoo County resident. The girls are referred to the home by the Department of Human Services.

Thorpe realized the need for the facility from her work as an anger-management counselor with young people in the 9th District Court in Kalamazoo.

``The children really did need a place to go, a haven, some support, and I also saw myself working with the family, as a whole," Bracewell-Thorpe said. ``The state calls it a child-care institution. We lay people call it a girls group home."

Among those welcoming the facility's opening is Jeff Patton, executive director of Kalamazoo Community Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services.

``The group home will help to fill a gap in the service continuum in Kalamazoo by offering transitional services to girls age 13 to 17," Patton wrote in an e-mail. ``The program will offer much-needed counseling and educational support to the home's residents."

The home's location in Kalamazoo offers an added benefit, according to Patton.

``It will allow residents of Kalamazoo to stay in Kalamazoo," he said. ``And this is especially important for young girls enrolled in KPS so they can take advantage of the Kalamazoo Promise."The girls share eight bedrooms in the Victorian home -- two to a room, except for a single bedroom downstairs. There are two bathrooms, a kitchen and dining room area and living room where group-therapy sessions will be held.

The rooms are outfitted, each room with its own matching colored comforters and a single long dresser, and all have long windows allowing in lots of natural light.

The home will be staffed around the clock, leading the girls in cooking and cleaning and laundering -- chores that they will learn to do in life-skills sessions. Bracewell-Thorpe, a wife and mother of four, plans to spend some nights in the facility's third-floor apartment.

“We will prepare them for independent living,” she said.

Girls will be taught how to prepare a balanced meal and how to do laundry, prepare a budget, open a bank account and balance a checkbook.

The girls will attend Kalamazoo Public Schools, work toward a GED certification or pursue vocational training, she said.

Bracewell-Thorpe expects girls to live in the house from six months to a year and receive 90 minutes of group therapy five days a week, plus 50 minutes of individual therapy once a week.

Part of the facility's goal is family reunification, and Bracewell-Thorpe and her staff will make regular visits to work with the families of the girls in her facility.

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Vanderleek receives up to 15 years for child abuse

By SEAN HARKINS

On Thursday, Alpena County 26th Judicial Circuit Court Judge John Kowalski sentenced Christopher Vanderleek to 26 months to 15 years in prison for first degree child abuse.

On Sept. 21, Vanderleek was found guilty of child abuse from an incident on May 2, when he took his 12-week-old daughter to Alpena Regional Medical Center claiming he fell on her.

Staff at the hospital noticed old bruises on the child and took x-rays and ran an MRI scan and found the girl was bleeding from her brain. The child was then airlifted to Hurley Medical Center in Flint and according to a medical report, has made a full recovery.

She had suffered a fractured thigh, a fractured rib and two subdural hematomas.

It was determined Vanderleek had deliberately inflicted harm on the child.

Alpena County Prosecuting Attorney Dennis Grenkowicz said he was pushing for a longer sentence, and may appeal part of the decision.

Felony convictions are subject to sentencing guidelines and those guidelines are determined by offense variables. One of those variables asked if the victim of the crime was treated with sadism, torture or excessive brutality.

Grenkowicz said he believes the 12-week-old baby was treated with excessive brutality. He said he interprets the variable differently than Kowalski did.

He said he believes the variable is applicable in this case because one, but not all, of the requirements is met.

Kowalski scored that variable as a zero, which means it did not add time to the sentence.

"We're exploring the feasibility of appealing the judge's ruling on the offense variable," Grenkowicz said.

Had that variable been scored differently the minimum sentence would have been between 36-60 months instead of 21-35 months.

Even if that did happen, Grenkowicz said he would have like the guidelines to be disregarded because of the nature of the crime.

"I had argued for a sentence of 8 to 15 years," he said.

Since keeping the guidelines was the judge's discretion, Grenkowicz said it is unlikely they will appeal that decision.

Defense Attorney Dan White could not be reached for comment.

Sean Harkins can be reached via e-mail at sharkins@thealpenanews.com or by phone at 358-5688.



Mom pleads no-contest to neglect of son

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Saturday, December 01, 2007

By Kim Crawford

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A Mundy Township woman who was asleep in her home when her young son found a pistol under her bed and accidentally shot himself entered a no-contest plea to a civil charge of neglect in Genesee County Family Court on Friday.

But the attorney for the woman, Julie Herrick, and her husband, Nathan, stressed that they were making every effort to prove to that they can be good parents and shouldn't have their parental rights terminated for two older children, the sister and half-sister of 3-year-old Nicholas Herrick.

"They've been going to parenting classes, grief counseling, gun safety - they've undergone drug testing," Michael P. Manley said of the Herricks. "There are no guns in the house anymore."

While the petition filed against Julie Herrick by state social workers sought the termination of her parental rights, Judge Michael J. Theile of the family division of the Genesee Circuit Court, stressed during the hearing that the ultimate goal of the child protection system is the return of children to their parents.

"It's the court's hope we can move toward the reunification of the family," he said.

Nicholas, who was autistic, died at their home about noon May 31 when he found a handgun under his mother's bed and accidentally shot himself. Julie Herrick, 27, had worked into the early morning hours that day and was asleep at the time.

With the no-contest plea by Julie Herrick, the judge takes jurisdiction of the two girls, ages 9 and 5. The younger girl is the child of the Herricks. The older child is the daughter of Julie Herrick and a man who now has a family in the Detroit area.

State Department of Human Services workers have placed the older girl with her father's family, while the younger daughter has been placed with a relative of Julie Herrick.

Theile order an independent psychologist to interview and visit the children and the families to report on their physical and emotional status.

He also expanded the visitation time for the parents to see the girls.

Andrea L. LeGendre, the assistant Genesee County prosecutor who represents the state DHS, agreed that the state would hold off on moving for the termination of the Herricks' parental rights while authorities determine if they are making progress.

Theile noted that there has been tension between the family of the father of Julie Herrick's older daughter and the Herricks over what he called the "tragic" case.

He instructed the DHS to provide whatever services were appropriate or necessary for the Herricks.

"Emotions continue to run high, that's understandable," he said. "But this is not a custody case. ... Let's look at the best interests of these kids. They've been through a good deal."

The judge set a hearing date for 90 days to continue the case, allowing the independent psychologist to make her evaluation.

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Muskegon Chronicle

Teen enters plea in brother's killing

Saturday, December 01, 2007

By John S. Hausman

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A Muskegon Heights teenager who killed his 20-year-old brother with a shotgun blast will go to a locked youth facility -- with the prospect of freedom and a reduced conviction at age 21 if he behaves, or an adult prison sentence if he doesn't.

Brandon Parham, 16, pleaded no contest to second-degree murder Friday after Family Court Judge Neil G. Mullally agreed to an arrangement known as "delayed adult sentencing," under which Parham will be sentenced as a juvenile for now, but could still get an adult sentence later.

Parham was convicted in the Aug. 27 slaying of his brother, Kenneth Parham, who died from a single shotgun blast to his abdomen. He has been held without bail at the Muskegon County Youth Home since his arrest. He had been charged with open murder, which left open the possibility of conviction of anything from first-degree murder to manslaughter.

Police and prosecutors said the brothers had gotten into an argument at the Parham home, 3315 Eighth, after arguing repeatedly in previous days.

Just before the shooting, Brandon Parham had gone to his bedroom with a 16-gauge shotgun, Prosecutor Tony Tague said earlier. Kenneth came walking down the hallway, and Brandon shot him from about 10 feet away in the abdominal area, Tague said.

The mortally wounded Kenneth Parham fled across the street, collapsed on a neighbor's front porch, and the neighbor called 911 around 6 p.m. Brandon Parham and a friend of his who was in the house at the time fled, leaving the shotgun behind.

Under the plea deal, approved by the Muskegon County Prosecutor's Office as well as the judge, Mullally will sentence Parham to a youth training center -- most likely Wolverine Secure Treatment Center in Saginaw. The judge will review his case annually.

If Parham commits no further violations while under court supervision, Mullally or his successor could reduce the conviction to manslaughter when the youth turns 21 in 2012 and free him from court supervision.

But if Parham does commit violations, Mullally at any time could sentence him as an adult to the Michigan Department of Corrections.

A no-contest plea is not an admission of guilt but results in conviction, and judges treat it as a guilty plea at sentencing. Parham's sentencing is expected Dec. 21.

The prosecutor's office earlier opted to "designate" Parham to be tried as an adult in Family Court. That gave Mullally the options of sentencing him as an adult or a juvenile, or the delayed adult sentencing the judge chose.

Some confusion has surrounded details of the shooting, based on conflicting statements given to police by Brandon Parham and his friend who was in the house. Public defender David Williams said he had pondered the possibility of a self-defense argument, but opted to recommend the plea deal to Parham and both brothers' mother, Kim Parham, because it will keep the youth out of prison if he behaves.

"This provides what I wanted for Brandon -- the chance to avoid prison," Williams said after the plea. "The uncertainties of trial is why we did what we did."

Kim Parham was present at the plea. She has declined to comment publicly throughout the case.

Also in court, as at earlier court appearances, were about a half-dozen teenage friends of Brandon Parham.

Both brothers had extensive criminal histories, and Kenneth Parham also had a history of mental illness and combative behavior, Williams said.

According to statements to police, the brothers had a fight the night before the shooting, and Kim Parham had thrown Kenneth Parham out of the house, with Brandon pointing the shotgun at his older brother to get him to leave.

The older brother reportedly returned the next day while Kim Parham was gone and confronted Brandon in the presence of Brandon's friend. The brothers began fighting.

Under one version given to police, the older brother picked up the shotgun, pointed it at Brandon and pulled the trigger, but the gun didn't go off. But Brandon's friend later told police another version that didn't include Kenneth picking up the gun.

Brandon then reportedly ran to the bedroom with the shotgun, followed shortly after by Kenneth -- and the fatal shot.

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Domestic spat escalates

Monday, December 03, 2007

THE SAGINAW NEWS

A 54-year-old Saginaw man who police say drew a weapon on them was to face arraignment today.

Prosecutors authorized a felony warrant Friday for Isaac J. Swilley.

Buena Vista Township police said Swilley broke into a Vista Villa apartment on Hess about 1:30 a.m. Friday. Swilley threatened the tenant, his girlfriend, investigators said.

The warrant charges Swilley with carrying a concealed weapon, felony firearm possession, third-degree home invasion, stalking, first-degree home invasion, felonious assault, discharging a weapon inside a building, carrying a dangerous weapon with unlawful intent and resisting and obstructing a police officer.

Swilley was released from the state Department of Corrections system in February 1996 after serving a little more than three years of a 32-month to four-year sentence for four counts of assault with a dangerous weapon, state records show. v

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— THE — ANN ARBOR NEWS

Joy comes from gift of caring for others

Families shop wisely to help stretch clothing budget

Sunday, December 02, 2007

BY SUSAN L. OPPAT

The Ann Arbor News

Janet Marshall worried a bit when she learned the family she would be shopping with for the Ann Arbor News' Warm the Children program had seven children.

But she liked the idea of helping that family buy \$90 worth of warm clothes for each child, so she went to the Brighton Meijer store - with no idea she was the one who would come out of the experience with the greatest gift.

Marshall, of Green Oak Township, is a member of the Brighton Bookies, nine Brighton-area women in their mid-30s to late 60s. They read books they might not otherwise peruse and have met once a month for the last six years to discuss them.

Marshall read about the Warm the Children program last year, and called in December to volunteer to shop with a family. Families had already been matched with volunteers by then, so she went on a waiting list for this year.

When she got a postcard from Warm the Children this fall, it was addressed to her in care of the book club.

"So I thought I would ask the club if they wanted to do it," Marshall said.

The eight women who would be in town agreed.

The family she shopped with was a revelation, Marshall said.

"They were so appreciative," she said.

They also were organized.

"I guess you have to be with seven kids," said Marshall, who arrived to find each child with a cart of clothing. "They had gotten there two hours earlier, and had the shopping done. They stretched pennies as far as they could."

Marshall said the children got excited when they found something on clearance. A 10-year-old girl showed off a two-piece outfit she picked out.

"It makes you so aware of your own blessings in life, and how you need to stop up and help others," Marshall said.

Sharon Gabe, a member of the Bookies, shopped for a Warm the Children family a few years ago and has since moved to Novi. But she'll return to shop with a family this week.

On that first trip, the look in the mother's eyes as she carefully chose clothing for her children "was a lesson for me," Gabe said.

Bookworm Maryanne Kelly, 69, rehearses a holiday program four days a week with the Hartland Seniors and volunteers with her church. But she still made time to volunteer for Warm the Children.

When Kelly contacted her family to set up the shopping trip, the children's mother was ecstatic, she said.

"(The mother) had gone to the store the previous day to look for boots, and the only boots she could find in their sizes, she couldn't afford," Kelly said. "There are things you do that aren't always for yourself, that make you feel better."

Susan Oppat can be reached at soppat@annarbornews.com or at 734-482-1166.

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Church spreads warmth

Saturday, December 01, 2007

As part of community outreach, a parishioner donated 120 coats to students at a Saginaw school.

ANDY HOAG

THE SAGINAW NEWS

When parishioners at a Saginaw Township church decided to make a Saginaw elementary school the focus of their community outreach, school officials were elated.

Imagine their feelings now that an anonymous donor from the church has provided new coats to 120 students at Stone Elementary, 1006 State.

The gesture is part of an initiative by Peace Lutheran Church, 3161 Lawndale, that has included a donation of backpacks filled with school supplies and a mentoring project for Stone students.

Stone teacher Cynthia Pape, a parishioner at the church, told her fellow church members that Stone's 326 students were definitely in need of their assistance.

"We provided backgrounds on children and their needs (for the church)," Stone Principal Sylvia Trevino said. "When they saw that, they were really surprised that students were coming to school with so many needs."

Trevino said she was pleasantly surprised when the church decided to reach out to her school.

"At first I was overwhelmed that a church not that close to the school would do an outreach program with us," she said. "But we just embraced it. I thought it was fantastic."

Parishioners provided the backpacks at the beginning of the school year and asked what else they could do to help the students. That's where the need for coats arose.

"We have students coming to school either without a coat or with coats that are ripped or have broken zippers," Trevino said.

The donor offered to provide 200 coats, and Trevino and her staff created a list of 120 students they determined needed them.

"If we find more students in need, we can still ask for more," she said.

Church members also have provided holiday-related donations, giving Thanksgiving baskets to families and a Christmas tree full of lights to the school.

Throughout the school year, 26 parishioners have acted as mentors to students.

The mentors meet with their students about twice a week, Trevino said. They come to Stone Elementary during the lunch hour and provide emotional support for the children, not academic help.

"They have developed relationships with the children," Trevino said. "It's going really well."

The outreach program will last the whole school year. Trevino said she will meet with parishioners in December to thank them and provide an update on the students.

"Some of these families are without water, coats, etc., and have so many needs," Trevino said. "I am so

grateful that community people are reaching out like this." v

Andy Hoag is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9716.

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Santa Claus Girls: Children gather toys for others

Monday, December 03, 2007

By Aaron Ogg

The Grand Rapids Press

For the third year, students in the Champions before- and after-school child-care programs are rounding up all the teddy bears, Barbies and mittens they can muster.

The gifts will be donated to Santa Claus Girls, the Press-sponsored charity that raises money for needy children ages 6 months to 12 years.

Last year, children from five locations brought in about 50 items, said Champions area manager Tracy Musgrave. Champions, part of a national corporation, now has six locations at elementary schools in Grand Rapids, Wyoming and Kentwood.

Musgrave said her locations had done a lot for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, but there is benefit in going with a local charity. "It could go to someone these kids might know," she said.

Each location offers different incentives. At Gladiola Elementary School, 3500 Gladiola Ave. SW in Wyoming, students get a popcorn and pizza party if they hit 30 or more.

Site director Erika Kolakowski said they are well on their way to an increase over last year.

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Santa Claus Girls in its 100th year

Saturday, December 01, 2007

By Matt Vande Bunte

The Grand Rapids Press

Ask around if the Santa Claus Girls know Adriana VanDoorn, and looks of uncertainty register on their faces. Then, somebody's eyes light up and out comes the story.

She is the original Santa Claus Girl, who started the charity in 1908 to make sure area children get a gift on Christmas. Although the name no longer rings a bell with many volunteers of the charity -- now in its 100th year -- today's helpers have much in common with the founder.

"I want to make sure that all children are remembered, not forgotten," said Ardis Hawley, 87, who has volunteered for the past 25 years. "Today I see more children that need to know that someone cares for them."

Although the Santa Claus Girls operation has changed in the past century, the original heart has kept beating for the Press-sponsored charity, which raises money to buy gifts for needy Kent County children ages 6 months to 12 years.

The scale has increased -- from \$85 that bought 150 gifts in 1908 to more than 11,000 gifts last year and a \$165,000 fundraising goal this season -- but the concept has stayed the same. Toys, clothing and candy, and a love that embodies the spirit of Christmas, get packaged into every gift.

Then a pastor's assistant at Park Congregational Church, VanDoorn was alerted by a Grand Rapids Herald reporter to a story about a Philadelphia woman who tried to play Santa Claus for needy children.

She sought out Herald editor Arthur H. Vandenberg, who later became a U.S. senator, and he offered the publicity to get the Santa Claus Girls started. VanDoorn organized 10 Sunday school teachers to run the operation that first year, and by the 1930s more than 10,000 children were getting presents each Christmas.

"As a little girl I always wanted to be able to answer the letters that were written to Santa Claus," VanDoorn told a Herald reporter in 1948. "Merchants and business people gave us help from the very beginning. I have always felt that in Grand Rapids people knew how to put 'goodwill to men' in practice."

Hawley, from Comstock Park, learned that lesson early in life when her grandmother made dolls for the Santa Claus Girls during the Depression.

"The people who come in (to volunteer) feel like what they are doing is worthwhile. They know they are caring for children," Hawley said. "It isn't just the people who work here. It's all of those people who knit hats and mittens" and donate money.

Starting in the 1980s, Hawley served as the charity's vice president for 16 years under the leadership of Phyllis Scanlon. Back then, before the charity adopted computers, the Santa Claus Girls wrote gift requests by hand. They packaged presents with string instead of Scotch tape.

And sometimes they worked in buildings that lacked heat, so they cut the fingertips out of their gloves to wrap the gifts.

"I loved it. I loved what I did," said Scanlon, 82, who still works the Santa Claus Girls phones one day a

week. She had just taken a call from a mother of four children, ages 1 to 6, whose father deserted the family last year.

"Grand Rapids has grown and we have grown right along with it."

But for all the changes over the years, Adriana VanDoorn's goal of giving Christmas presents to needy children has been constant.

"There was a knock on the door," longtime volunteer Bonnie Kroon recalled of her own childhood encounter with the Santa Claus Girls in 1930s. "We were shooed out of the room."

"The next morning we had a present under the tree. We wouldn't have had a Christmas if it hadn't been for the Santa Claus Girls."

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Over 400 receive free food, clothing and gifts

Sunday, December 02, 2007

By Elizabeth Piet

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Courtney Cruz collected milk, potatoes and yogurt from In the Image volunteers to help her through the tough month ahead.

Alongside her, 2-year-old Savannah held a holiday picture book that was slipped into the box to take home.

A little bit of Christmas cheer found its way into boxes and bags held by more than 400 needy residents visiting the charity at its South Division Avenue location Saturday.

Spreading cheer

Volunteers put extra holiday spirit into this month's food drive. Members of Knapp Reformed Church sang Christmas carols and read holiday stories -- both in Spanish and English.

Those waiting for food also received holiday decorations and children's books.

In The Image distributes free clothing, furniture and household items to low-income families, and about once a month, the effort is combined with Ada Congregational Church and First United Methodist Church to bring about 10,000 pounds of food from Second Harvest Gleaners of West Michigan.

The added singing, reading and gifts from Knapp Reformed Church volunteers made for a spirited morning, said Paul Haagsman, In The Image executive director.

"It's one of the random acts of kindness that makes life joyful," he said.

Holiday favorites

A group of children gathered around the Rev. Allen Pickett to hear "Jingle Bells" and "Frosty the Snowman" while parents moved throughout the warehouse shelves.

By the end of the two-hour shopping period, almost all the clothing was gone and food had been distributed. Families bundled up against the cold air to take the needed items home.

"With the way things are these days, we find more and more people are hungry," said Skip Mosely, a First United Methodist Church volunteer. "It doesn't solve the problem, but we help."

For Cruz, the food helped her juggle the many needs for her daughter.

"She's my top priority," Cruz said, as the pair walked to the car with the groceries. "It's hard to be a single mom. My freezer and fridge have been empty for days."

Others, such as Carla Dentmond, needed extra clothing for herself and her 11-year-old daughter to prepare for the cold months ahead.

"This is a good place to come," she said. "You can never get too much. Winter's right around the corner."



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Too late: Legislative opposition to MSP project won't benefit taxpayers

A Lansing State Journal editorial

It's time for taxpayers to face a frustrating fact: An office building will be constructed on downtown Lansing's Triangle site. It will house the new headquarters of the Michigan State Police, under a lease/buy contract between the state and developers Gary Granger and Joel Ferguson.

That's not the best use of the site. That's not the best use of precious tax dollars. That's probably not even the intention of Michigan voters.

Still, the moments to halt this project - and they did arise in 2007 - have passed. A legislative bid to get around the contract now carries with it constitutional concerns.

Worse, this after-the-fact squabbling over a business arrangement just detracts from Michigan's business reputation. What business wants to operate in a state where the Legislature goes after a finalized contract?

This dispute also is more evidence of the fundamental political instability in Lansing.

Both a bipartisan legislative committee and an executive branch panel that includes members of both political parties signed off on the MSP project - in votes five months apart. Still, state Rep. Rick Jones, R-Grand Ledge, has nearly a majority of the House of Representatives signed up for his bill to deny tax funds for any lease payments.

In March, when the issue came before the Joint Capital Outlay Committee, the 20 member-legislators received not a single testimonial from a colleague in opposition to the project.

It may be one thing for members of the public not to keep track of exactly when a key vote is coming on a big state lease, but what's the excuse for lawmakers who have taxpayer-financed personal staffs to keep them informed?

To be clear, this is not an endorsement of the project itself. Placing a government office building with significant security needs on the Grand River is not consistent with general efforts to revive the riverfront. Better locations existed in downtown Lansing.

And that's not to mention the awful timing of this deal - a commitment to a new building just when the state was struggling with the question of state trooper layoffs and other cutbacks.

There were plenty of reasons to stave off this contract. It's disappointing that the elected officials charged with proposing and approving the deal did not do so.

But at this point, consuming the Legislature in a legal challenge is far more likely to scar Michigan's business reputation than halt the project. And that would make an unfortunate result even worse.

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